

Testimony

Senate Bill 2380

Senate Transportation Committee

Thursday, February 10, 2005; 9 a.m.

North Dakota Department of Health

Good morning, Chairman Trenbeath and members of the Senate Transportation Committee. My name is Carol Meidinger, and I am director of the North Dakota Department of Health's Injury Prevention Program. I am here to testify in support of Senate Bill 2380.

The mission of the Injury Prevention Program is to review causes of injury and to develop programs to reduce the number and severity of injuries. According to the department's Division of Vital Records, unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death for North Dakotans ages 1 through 44, with motor vehicle crashes being the leading cause of injury death. From 1999 through 2003, 446 North Dakotans died in motor vehicle crashes – an average of 89 deaths per year. The most tragic thing about deaths from motor vehicle crashes is that many of them could be prevented with the use of safety belts.

Most people don't dispute the effectiveness of seat belts. The debate usually centers on whether seat belt use should be mandatory or if seat belt laws should have primary or secondary enforcement. Many people believe education is the key to increasing seat belt use; however, North Dakota has tried secondary enforcement combined with strong educational campaigns for the last 10 years and has met with limited success. A recent Department of Transportation observation survey indicated that only 67 percent of drivers buckle up, making North Dakota 45th in the nation in seat belt use. States with primary enforcement have seat belt use rates that are 10 to 15 percentage points higher than states with secondary enforcement. Twenty-one states have already upgraded their laws to allow for primary enforcement.

Primary enforcement is important to increase seat belt use not only by adults, but also by children. A national study indicated that when adults buckle up, 87 percent of the children riding with them buckle up; but when adults do not buckle up, only 24 percent of the children riding with them buckle up.

In summary, deaths and injuries caused by motor vehicle crashes are a major public health issue with a readily available remedy – the use of seat belts. Our department, along with many other health and traffic safety agencies, encourages all North

Dakotans to help build a Healthy North Dakota by buckling up. Finally, health education efforts are most effective when combined with strong laws – similar to laws regulating speed limits, driving under the influence and childhood immunizations.

The Department of Health would appreciate your favorable response to Senate Bill 2380. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.